



School Nursing In North Carolina: From A New Idea To The New Deal (Part 1)

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Abstract

School nursing programs were introduced in New York City in 1902. Afterward, several municipal school and health districts, particularly in the Northeast and the West, began their own school nursing services (Rogers, 1917). In other areas of the country, particularly the Southeast, school nursing remained an under-developed area of nursing practice. In each location, it developed uniquely, responding to local personalities, political considerations and community needs. By the early 1930's the Great Depression and the Federal response known as the New Deal began to change the provincial nature of school nursing services.

Pollitt, P. & Reese, C. (1997). School Nursing In North Carolina: From A New Idea To The New Deal (Part 1). *American History of Nursing Bulletin*, Summer, 6-8. NC Docks permission to re-print granted by author(s).

SCHOOL NURSING IN NORTH CAROLINA: FROM A NEW IDEA TO THE NEW DEAL.

Part I.

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School nursing programs were introduced in New York City in 1902. Afterward, several municipal school and health districts, particularly in the Northeast and the West, began their own school nursing services (Rogers, 1917). In other areas of the country, particularly the Southeast, school nursing remained an under-developed area of nursing practice. In each location, it developed uniquely, responding to local personalities, political considerations and community needs. By the early 1930's the Great Depression and the Federal response known as the New Deal began to change the provincial nature of school nursing services.

At the turn of the 20th century formal education in North Carolina was a meager affair at best. For the most part, one and two room school houses were opened for four months out of the year at public expense. Some of the early teachers had considerable education while the ability of others was severely limited. Support services such as transportation, food service and school health were unknown in NC (Whiteaner, 1949).

In 1900, the movement to improve public education in NC got an inadvertent boost from the move to disenfranchise African American voters. In that year, the electorate approved an amendment to the state constitution to restrict voting to men who would be required to pay a poll tax and pass a literacy test.

As late as 1900, one fifth of the white male population in NC was illiterate (Gilmore, 1996). An

unexpected consequence of this legislation was an increased interest in public schooling by white working and middle class families. By the end of the first decade of the 20th century, public education facilities, quality of teachers, length of the school term and school support services had improved.

Concurrently, a new era in public health was beginning. The role that nutrition, sanitation, hygiene and lifestyle choice played in health and disease was being recognized. Scientific breakthroughs in medicine and surgery offered new hope to many people. These convergent advances in education and public health were the catalysts for the emergence of school nursing.

The first school nurse in the tar heel state was Percy Powers of Salem. In 1911, the Wayside Workers of the Home Moravian Church, a charitable service organization of Moravian women, hired Powers to do health inspection and follow-up work among the school children of East and West Salem schools. She measured height and weight, and screened for vision, dental problems, swollen tonsils and adenoids, and malnutrition. She also taught students and parents basic sanitation, nutrition and hygiene to prevent and control the spread of disease. Powers remained in this position until 1917, when Winston Salem established a city health department, and she accepted the position of supervising nurse. The Wayside Workers continued to fund a school nurse who worked closely with Powers at the health department for four and a half years until the city assumed responsibility for school nursing (Wyche, 1938).

On May 1, 1915, the NC State Board of Health organized the Bureau of Rural Sanitation. The aim of this new department was to interest local governments in funding public health work. One demonstration project was Medical Inspection of School Units (NC Board of Health, 1966). Doctors and dentists made a thorough survey of several thousand children enrolled in schools in six widely scattered counties to determine the physical conditions of children of all ages, races and

socioeconomic classes. The results were appalling. Eighty percent of the children needed dental treatment, more than 10% had diseased throats, more than 5 % had defective vision and/or hearing, and numerous others suffered from tuberculosis, malaria, hookworm, and malnutrition (Health Bulletin, 1919).

The resulting publicity served as a catalyst at the state legislature meeting in 1917 to enact measures expanding the work of the State Board of Health. These measures included a provision "to provide for the physical examination of the school children of the state at regular intervals...". However well-intentioned, the legislature made no money available for the staff to carry out this mission. This omission was remedied in the next session of the legislature. In 1919, enough money was allocated to hire six full-time nurses to travel across the state and provide screening and follow-up services at three year intervals for all students under the seventh grade, regardless of race (NC Board of Health, 1966).

NC's state-supported school nursing program was restrictive in nature in the racial makeup of the nurses. By law and custom, white nurses could travel anywhere in the state and treat any child, but this was not the case for African American nurses. In many rural white communities, lodging and hospitality were not available to them. The State Board of Health did not hire an African American nurse for school work until 1938 (NC State Board of Health, 1939). The first six registered nurses to serve the state as school nurses and who all remained in their jobs for over 18 years were Birdie Dunn, Cleone Hobbs, Mrs. HP Guffy, Flora Ray, Cora Beam and Katherine Livingston (State School Nurses, 1933). Other registered nurses were employed by city and county health units to provide school nursing services. Some of the other early school nurses in NC were Emily Pickard of Durham, Blanche Lambe of Greensboro, Sallie Cook and Girlie Strickland of Winston Salem. Strickland appears to be the first African American registered nurse to work in NC (Wyche, 1938).

The nineteenth biennial report of the NC Board of Health issued in 1922 contained a summary of the work of the Bureau of Medical Inspection of Schools branch. The objectives of this Branch were: (1) to arouse the teachers of the elementary schools of NC to the necessity of making the same efforts to teach the children things they should know for the development of their bodies and for the protection of their health that they make for their intellectual advancement; (2) to discover the children who have remedial defects, and to have them treated while curable and before the condition becomes chronic.

In order to carry out these mandates, the nurses lectured directly to groups of teachers as well as in their classrooms on various health topics, and demonstrated to teachers simple screening techniques that they could use when they suspected physical problems. During the biennium, 1919-1921, the six nurses also coordinated clinics for immunizations, tonsil and adenoid removal, and dental treatments; and inspected 92,566 students (NC Board of Health, 1922).

According to Dr. George Cooper (1935), the supervising physician of the Medical Inspection of Schools program, the six nurses "have taught the benefits of good health to the people of every community in NC. They have traveled on foot, horseback, on rafts, by boat, tram, on cart, anyway to reach the "forgotten child".

A report submitted to Dr. Cooper by Cleone Hobbs, one of the six state supported school nurses, describes a situation she found in Wilkes County in 1919. She wrote the following about a patient seen in the tonsil and adenoid clinic:

"The last one who came in before 1 p.m. was a pitiful looking woman and child dusty and travel stained...The child was a boy nine years old. His mouth was open. I looked at his throat. I don't think I have ever seen a worse throat. It was almost closed. The tonsils met at one point. The other part throat so they bulged and looked taut and shiny like a balloon. I asked the mother how far they came and

she said eight miles. I asked her how she came and was amazed when she replied "we walked".

The child was lying on a bench. I questioned her and found out she had four children. That her husband worked at sawmill for \$1.50 a day and they owned 40 acres of land. She said her husband was not well, had dropsy in his feet sometimes. She had been telling her husband for some time that something would have to be done for the child. He cannot talk plain and chokes when he is asleep. His pillow is always wet with saliva ...Before I knew all this I asked her if they could afford to pay and she said yes. They would manage it some way. After I found out I told her I would do him free. I have shed the first tears in this county over this incident. That is saying a lot".

There is an editorial postscript to this report and it is unclear if Dr. Cooper or Nurse Hobbs wrote it. It seems to reflect the values of all the early pioneers in school health in NC. It says "We suppose an investigation would be in order in this case, or at least a committee appointed to place a value on the forty acres and to inquire about the whereabouts of the mule before arranging for a life saving operation for that boy. But we will cheerfully leave all that to the coroner or somebody. Our business is to get the child treated before it is too late." (Hobbs, 1919).

-To be continued in Fall 1997 *Bulletin*-



NEWS FROM MEMBERS

Olga Church has been awarded a Radcliff College Research Support Grant to continue her research in psychiatric nursing for the academic year 1997-1998. She sends the following thought to us for our busy lives:

"The art of living presupposes the ability to make good physical, intellectual and social adjustments and the art of nursing must weave into its structure the art of living."

Euphemia Jane Taylor, 1928.

1997 AAHN CONFERENCE Hartford, Connecticut September 26-28, 1997

If you haven't already sent in your registration and reserved your hotel room, **HURRY!** September isn't that far away! And there won't be another *Bulletin* to remind you, so get out the flyer you received in the mail and send in your reservation.

If you haven't received one or have misplaced it, just get in touch with Eleanor K. Herrmann, School of Nursing, University of Connecticut, 231 Glenbrook Rd., Storrs, CT 06269.

And don't forget the auction. Eleanor would like a description of whatever you plan to contribute as soon as possible, so a listing can appear in the auction catalog. All proceeds will go to the AAHN Scholarship Fund.

(References continued from Page 7)

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REQUEST FOR SUBMISSIONS

THE 1998 COMPETITIVE STUDENT RESEARCH AWARD PROGRAM

The American Association for the History of Nursing (AAHN) encourages students to apply for the Competitive Student Research Award. The purpose of this award is to support graduate work in historical research. One proposal will be funded in the amount of \$400.00.

Studies must focus on the history of nursing; students need to be enrolled in either an accredited masters program or a doctoral program located in a regionally accredited university; students must be members of AAHN; the student's research advisor needs to be doctorally prepared with scholarly activity in the field of nursing history and have prior experience in guiding student research.

Three copies of the application are needed for review. The title page includes the investigator's name, title of the study, faculty advisor and institution. The narrative plan for the study should be five pages or less and contain: the purpose, focus and significance of the study, a list of potential primary and secondary sources and any other relevant facilities and resources to be used. The student's and advisor's curriculum vitae along with a letter of support from the advisor complete the application.

The recipient must be present to receive the award at the Fifteenth Annual International Conference of the American Association for the History of Nursing Conference to be held in Jackson, Mississippi in September 1998.

Please forward three copies by May 15, 1998 to:

Dr. Elizabeth Norman, Chair
Awards Committee, AAHN
8 South Brookwood Drive
Montclair, New Jersey 07042